

NTEU enforces deep pay and job cuts at Australian universities

Mike Head
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The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is pressing ahead in its collaboration with university managements to inflict cuts to wages, jobs and basic conditions. This is despite a rebellion by union members that led to the collapse of NTEU's "national framework" that offered managements wage cuts of up to 15 percent at all 39 public universities and still accepted the loss of 18,000 jobs.

In the latest outrage, the NTEU national executive is urging staff members at Adelaide University to take pay cuts of up to 15 percent and still accept the elimination of 200 jobs. The union struck a deal with the management following talks that the university's grateful acting vice-chancellor described as "constructive."

The Adelaide agreement again demonstrates that the union will stop at nothing to assist the employers and governments as they exploit the global COVID-19 pandemic to impose unprecedented attacks on university workers, who already have experienced years of under-funding, soaring workloads and casualisation.

Like workers everywhere, university educators and professional staff members are being forced by the trade unions to pay the price for the failure of global capitalism to protect lives and livelihoods from the pandemic, which is resurging around the world as a direct result of the ruling elite's "economic reopening" program.

The NTEU's collaboration is paving the way for an acceleration of this offensive as the pandemic worsens. Adding to the tidal wave of retrenchments already underway, thousands more university jobs will be destroyed because of the COVID-19 catastrophe in the state of Victoria. The resulting economic hit nationally, and the extension of travel bans and other restrictions, will further devastate universities.

Universities Australia previously predicted up to 30,000 positions would be destroyed in the next three years because of an expected \$16 billion of lost revenue, primarily due to the loss of high fee-paying international students. Those estimates are now clearly an understatement.

Melbourne University Vice-Chancellor Duncan Maskell

yesterday announced the scrapping of 450 full-time jobs—5 percent of the workforce—plus an unknown number of casual and fixed-term positions. But he said he would consult the NTEU on how to implement the cuts and university would do "everything we can to minimise involuntary redundancies"—which is a means of working with the union to try to stifle resistance.

This is part of an avalanche of job cuts, including 493 at the University of New South Wales, 277 at Monash University, 210 at the University of New England, more than 200 at Charles Sturt University, up to 20 percent of the workforce at Sydney's Macquarie University and still-to-be finalised numbers at Newcastle University.

The NTEU is trying to sidetrack the outrage of university workers and students into a parliamentary petition campaign, imploring Centre Alliance and other right-wing senators to block the Liberal-National government's latest student fee hikes and funding cuts. This serves only to stifle independent action by university staff.

At the same time, the union is joining hands with big business leaders, such as Business Council chief executive Jennifer Westacott, to plead with the government to recognise that universities deliver the kinds of "dynamic" graduates that employers want. According to NTEU national president Alison Barnes, writing in the August edition of the union's *Sentry* magazine, this business support shows that "everyone looks to the government for a plan to stop Australian universities from sinking beneath the waves."

Alongside this partnership with business leaders, the NTEU is urging university workers and students to sign a sycophantic open letter to university vice-chancellors, asking them to "stand with us" and oppose the government's measures. These are the same vice-chancellors with whom the NTEU is holding hands as they shut down courses, close campuses, slash wages and axe jobs.

Adelaide University Acting Vice-Chancellor Professor Mike Brooks sent an email to staff welcoming the "in-principle" deal with the union, endorsed by the NTEU national executive. Clause 19.2 of the agreement states that

the total wage reduction can be “an amount equivalent to a maximum total of 15 percent of a staff member’s salary in any given pay period.”

These reductions can include three weeks of compulsory leave purchase, a 3.5 percent wage cut over nine months, the deferral of a pay rise and the axing of annual holiday leave loading. From September, for example, an administrative worker on just above the median full-time female wage of \$65,000 a year would lose 8 percent—\$263 per fortnight.

Supposedly, this would “save” 200 of the 400 full-time jobs currently facing elimination, but there is no real guarantee of this, especially as the health and economic crisis continues.

At some universities, the NTEU has opposed management proposals, but only because they have been drafted without consultation with the union, which is preoccupied solely with retaining its role as the vehicle for policing the requirements of the employers.

At Victoria’s Deakin University, the NTEU last month appealed to the Fair Work Commission, the federal government’s industrial court, over the management’s plans to axe 427 jobs. Recognising the value of the union’s services, the commission ordered the management to conduct “meaningful consultation” with the union and staff. The order instructed the university to provide “some limited information” on its plans to “the relevant NTEU officials.”

Far from being a protection of jobs, the order permitted the university to continue pursuing “voluntary” redundancies, with the commissioner encouraging the management to “seek some accommodation with the NTEU.”

As a result of this supposed “victory,” the union is imploring the management to “come back to the negotiating table in good faith.” Similar appeals to the Fair Work Commission have become another means for the NTEU to head off the discontent of university workers.

Likewise, at Brisbane’s Griffith University, the NTEU is advocating a “no” vote to a management plan that the union calls “sub-standard,” while insisting that “NTEU members agree” that “everyone has to chip in to help in these difficult times.” On that basis, it is urging its members to tell the management “to negotiate a better deal.”

University workers need to reject the ultimatums being put forward by the NTEU, governments and management: accept wage cuts and other concessions or face redundancies. This is the framework created by governments and the financial elite.

The global pandemic is not the only cause of the deep crisis in the universities. It has accelerated what has been happening for years. Billions of dollars have been cut from universities, since massive cuts introduced by the last Greens-backed Labor Party government of 2010-2013.

Yesterday’s revelation that universities have illegally underpaid casual workers by millions of dollars over the past decade underscores how far this process had gone, long before COVID-19, all facilitated by enterprise agreements negotiated by the NTEU.

The record demonstrates that university academics, staff and students can defend jobs and fight for free, high-quality education, only through a rebellion against the NTEU and other unions and the entire political establishment.

The NTEU’s intensifying collaboration with the employers shows the necessity of the joint call issued on June 15 by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) for university workers and students to unite to form independent rank-and-file committees, to prosecute a genuine industrial and political struggle against all the union-enforced attacks.

That requires challenging the capitalist profit system and its grip over society. This means turning to a socialist perspective, based on the total reorganisation of society in the interests of all, instead of the financial oligarchy. We urge all university workers and students who want to take forward this fight to contact the CFPE or IYSSE, both established by the Socialist Equality Party.

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

CFPE

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation/>

Twitter account: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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